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Polyakov soldering and second order frames : the role of the Cartan connection

Serge Lazzarini^{*} and Carina Tidei[†]

CENTRE DE PHYSIQUE THÉORIQUE[‡]
CNRS Luminy – case postale 907,
F-13288 Marseille Cedex 9, France.

Abstract

The so-called ‘*soldering*’ procedure performed by A.M. Polyakov in [1] for a $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$ -gauge theory is geometrically explained in terms of a Cartan connection on second order frames of the projective space \mathbb{RP}^1 . The relationship between a Cartan connection and the usual (Ehresmann) connection on a principal bundle allows to gain an appropriate insight into the derivation of the genuine ‘*diffeomorphisms out of gauge transformations*’ given by Polyakov himself.

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^{*}e-mail: sel@cpt.univ-mrs.fr

[†]e-mail: tidei@cpt.univ-mrs.fr ; allocataire de recherche MESR.

[‡]Unité Mixte de Recherche (UMR 6207) du CNRS et des Universités Aix-Marseille I, Aix-Marseille II et de l’Université du Sud Toulon-Var. Unité affiliée à la FRUMAM Fédération de Recherche 2291.

1 Introduction

More than fifteen years ago, in a paper by A.M. Polyakov [1], diffeomorphism transformations for the 2-d conformal geometry were explicitly derived by a ‘*soldering procedure*’ from a partial gauge fixing of two components out of three of a chirally split $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$ -connection in the light-cone formulation. In doing so, Polyakov ended with a residual gauge transformation which exactly reproduced the Virasoro group action on the effective energy-momentum tensor. This striking result was raised by Polyakov himself as ‘*a geometrical surprise*’ and in addition some of the gauge parameters were noticed to be gauge field dependent.

Subsequently, some work *e.g.* [2, 3] directly referred to the Polyakov partial gauge fixing, which we shall call in the sequel as the ‘*Polyakov soldering*’. It has to be said that in [3] this intriguing result obtained by Polyakov was also emphasized as such.

In the present paper a proper differential geometrical framework is proposed in order to explain this ‘*geometrical surprise*’ [1, 3]. It is essentially grounded on the use of the Cartan connection on the second order frame bundle [4] and all the differential algebraic setup which goes with.

In order to have a concise and efficient geometrical writing, we shall use the BRS differential algebra for treating the gauge symmetry aspects.

One of the main ingredients will be the so-called solder forms on frame bundles [5], well known objects in mathematics and intuitively figured out by Polyakov under the phrasing ‘*soldering*’ procedure.

2 Second order frames

Let us briefly introduce the notion of the second order frame bundle. Most of the time, we shall adopt the viewpoint that physics often requires, the use of local expressions over a manifold. In other words, local comparison of a n -dimensional manifold M with \mathbb{R}^n will be of constant use.

According to [4, 6], consider the principal bundle F_2M of second order frames, or shortly 2-frames¹, over M . The elements of F_2M are 2-jets $j_2(f)(0)$ of local diffeomorphisms f from a neighborhood of 0 in \mathbb{R}^n to M such that $f(0) = x$. Given local coordinate systems $\{x^\mu\}_{\mu=1}^n$ on M and $\{u^a\}_{a=1}^n$ on \mathbb{R}^n , F_2M is equipped with local coordinates² $(x^\mu, e^\mu_a, e^\mu_{ab})$ corresponding to the successive derivatives of f at 0. Hence $e^\mu_a \neq 0$ and $e^\mu_{ab} = e^\mu_{ba}$. When the composition of maps makes sense, the jet product is given by the chain rule derivation $j_2(f) \cdot j_2(f') = j_2(f \circ f')$.

Accordingly 2-frame fields are sections of the bundle F_2M over M , $e_2(x) = (x^\mu, e^\mu_a(x), e^\mu_{ab}(x))$ with inverse given by $e_2^{-1}(x) = (x^\mu, e^a_\mu(x), e^a_{\mu\nu}(x))$ where

$$e^a_\mu e^\mu_b = \delta^a_b, \quad e^a_{\mu\nu} = -e^\lambda_{bc} e^b_\mu e^c_\nu e^a_\lambda. \quad (1)$$

In the u -coordinates, a 2-frame e_2 at $x \in M$ has the polynomial representative f ,

$$f^\mu(u) = x^\mu + e^\mu_a u^a + e^\mu_{ab} u^a u^b, \quad u \in \mathbb{R}^n,$$

¹It can be shown that they are torsion free linear frames over the linear frame bundle itself [7]

²Usual notation for gravitation will be constantly used [8].

such that $e_2 = j_2(f)(0)$, and the coordinates e_{ab}^μ and e_a^μ are independent variables. Moreover, note that the 2-frame at x associated to the local x -coordinates themselves are obtained as 2-jets of translations $(x^\mu, \delta_a^\mu, 0) = j_2(u \mapsto x + u)(0)$. This induces a *natural* 2-frame at x [9].

The structure group of F_2M is the so-called differential group of order two G_2 [10] locally given by the 2-jets $g_2 = (g_{a'}^a, g_{a'b'}^a)$ at 0 of diffeomorphisms g of \mathbb{R}^n fixing the origin³ 0. The right action given by jet product $e_2' = e_2 \cdot g_2 = j_2(f \circ g)(0)$ reads

$$f(g(0)) = f(0) = x, \quad e_{a'}^\mu = e_a^\mu g_{a'}^a, \quad e_{a'b'}^\mu = e_{ab}^\mu g_{a'}^a g_{b'}^b + e_a^\mu g_{a'b'}^a.$$

It is worthwhile to note the semi-direct product decomposition of $G_2 = GL_0 \ltimes GL_1$ with respect to the jet product, namely $g_2 = (g_{b'}^a, 0) \cdot (\delta_{a'}^{b'}, g_{a'b'}^b)$, with $(g_{a'}^a) \in GL_0 := GL(n, \mathbb{R})$ ⁴.

To the local x -coordinates on M , there corresponds a *natural gauge* in which the local coordinates of any 2-frame field $e_2 : x \mapsto e_2(x) \in G_2$ can be considered as an element of the gauge group, thanks to the pointwise identification $(e_a^\mu(x), e_{ab}^\mu(x)) = (\delta_c^\mu, 0) \cdot (g_a^c(x), g_{ab}^c(x))$.

Let us now introduce a family of solder 1-forms on F_2M (also called canonical forms) which are invariant under diffeomorphisms of M by taking the Maurer-Cartan like 1-form “ $f^{-1} \circ df$ ” in powers of $u \in \mathbb{R}^n$ [11],

$$(f^{-1} \circ df)^a(u) = \theta^a + \theta_b^a u^b + \frac{1}{2} \theta_{bc}^a u^b u^c + \dots$$

Then, in terms of the local coordinates $(x^\mu, e_a^\mu, e_{ab}^\mu)$ on F_2M the solder 1-forms read⁵

$$\theta^a = e_\mu^a dx^\mu, \quad \theta_b^a = e_\mu^a de_\mu^b + e_{\mu\nu}^a e_b^\mu dx^\nu. \quad (2)$$

In particular, they fulfil the torsion free condition $d\theta^a + \theta_b^a \wedge \theta^b = 0$.

3 Cartan connection on second order frames

Adding translations denoted as $g^a \in GL_{-1} \simeq \mathbb{R}^n$, consider now the structure group G_2 as a Lie subgroup of the Lie group $G := GL_{-1} \times G_2$. Denoting $\mathfrak{gl}_k := \text{Lie } GL_k, k = 0, \pm 1$, the Lie algebra \mathfrak{g} of G admits the decomposition $\mathfrak{g} = \mathfrak{gl}_{-1} \oplus \mathfrak{gl}_0 \oplus \mathfrak{gl}_1$. In the sequel, we set $\mathfrak{g}_2 := \text{Lie } G_2 = \mathfrak{gl}_0 \oplus \mathfrak{gl}_1$. Since G consists of 2-jets at 0 of diffeomorphisms $g_t(u) = u + tX(u)$ of \mathbb{R}^n , with $g_0 = id_{\mathbb{R}^n}$, $X(u) = (X^a + X_b^a u^b + X_{bc}^a u^b u^c + \dots) \partial_a$, its Lie algebra \mathfrak{g} consists of tangent vector fields at the identity $\mathbf{1} := j_2(id_{\mathbb{R}^n})(0) = (\delta_b^a, 0)$, given by the 2-jet at 0 of the vector field $X(u)$ on \mathbb{R}^n ,

$$X_2 := j_2(X)(0) = \left. \frac{d}{dt} \right|_{t=0} j_2(g_t)(0) = (X^a, X_b^a, X_{bc}^a).$$

The algebraic bracket is then defined to be *minus* the Lie bracket of vector fields [12],

$$\begin{aligned} [X, Y]^a &= X_b^a Y^b - Y_b^a X^b \\ [X, Y]_b^a &= X_c^a Y_b^c + X_{bc}^a Y^c - (X \leftrightarrow Y) \\ [X, Y]_{bc}^a &= X_d^a Y_{bc}^d + X_{dc}^a Y_b^d + X_{bd}^a Y_c^d - (X \leftrightarrow Y). \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

³The differential group is the little group relative to the origin.

⁴The motivation for the lower indices attached to GL will become clear below in the main text.

⁵ e_μ^a denotes the usual tetrad [8].

Then, $[\mathfrak{gl}_{-1}, \mathfrak{gl}_{-1}] = 0$ for the translation part and $[\mathfrak{gl}_k, \mathfrak{gl}_\ell] \subset \mathfrak{gl}_{k+\ell}$, $k, \ell = 0, \pm 1$. So, the Lie algebra \mathfrak{g} turns out to be a graded Lie algebra [4] with respect to the dilatation generator $u^a \partial_a$.

Moreover, considering the differential group of order three $G_3 \ni g_3 = (g_{a'}^{a'}, g_{ab}^{a'}, g_{abc}^{a'})$, an adjoint type action on \mathfrak{g} can be defined by [5]

$$\text{Ad}(g_3) X_2 = \left. \frac{d}{dt} \right|_{t=0} j_2(g' \circ g_t \circ g'^{-1})(0) = (X^{a'}, X_{b'}^{a'}, X_{b'c'}^{a'}) ,$$

where the transformed components are given by chain rule derivations as,

$$\begin{aligned} X^{a'} &= g_a^{a'} X^a , \\ X_{b'}^{a'} &= g_{ab}^{a'} X^b g_{b'}^a + g_a^{a'} X_b^a g_{b'}^b , \\ X_{b'c'}^{a'} &= g_{abc}^{a'} X^c g_{b'}^b g_{c'}^a + g_{ab}^{a'} X_c^b g_{b'}^c g_{c'}^a + g_{ac}^{a'} g_{b'}^c X_b^a g_{c'}^b \\ &\quad + g_a^{a'} X_{bc}^a g_{b'}^c g_{c'}^b + g_{ab}^{a'} X^b g_{b'}^a g_{c'}^c + g_a^{a'} X_b^a g_{b'c'}^b . \end{aligned} \tag{4}$$

Now, we are in position to introduce a Cartan connection on F_2M as a \mathfrak{g} -valued 1-form satisfying:

- $\forall e_2 \in F_2M$, $\omega|_{e_2} : T_{e_2}(F_2M) \rightarrow \mathfrak{g}$ is a linear isomorphism (absolute parallelism),
- $\forall g_2 \in G_2 \subset G_3$, $R_{g_2}^* \omega = \text{Ad}(g_2^{-1}) \omega$, where $g_2 = (g_a^{a'}, g_{ab}^{a'}, 0)$ (G_2 -equivariance),
- $\forall \hat{X} \in V(F_2M)$, $\omega(\hat{X}) \in \mathfrak{g}_2$.

According to the grading of \mathfrak{g} , the Cartan connection ω can be chosen to be [4]

$$\omega := \omega_{-1} + \omega_0 + \omega_1 = \theta^a + \theta_b^a + \omega_{bc}^a ,$$

where θ^a and θ_b^a are the solder forms on F_2M which are respectively \mathfrak{gl}_{-1} -valued, and \mathfrak{gl}_0 -valued 1-forms, and ω_{bc}^a is a \mathfrak{gl}_1 -valued 1-form on F_2M . Its curvature is defined by

$$K = d\omega + \frac{1}{2}[\omega, \omega] = K_{-1} + K_0 + K_1$$

where the bracket (3) has to be used. More explicitly one finds the torsion free condition $K_{-1} = d\omega_{-1} + \omega_0 \wedge \omega_{-1} = 0$ and the (generalized) curvature $K_0 = d\omega_0 + \frac{1}{2}[\omega_0, \omega_0] + [\omega_{-1}, \omega_1]$.

For the sequel, it is of use to note that, from a Cartan connection on F_2M it is possible to recover the Yang-Mills context by constructing a (Ehresmann) connection on the principal G -bundle $F_2M \times_{G_2} G$, see [13, 14]. Actually, at a point $(e_2, g) \in F_2M \times G$, one can construct the \mathfrak{g} -valued 1-form

$$\mathcal{A}|_{(e_2, g)} = \text{Ad}(g^{-1})(\pi_{F_2M})^* \omega + (\pi_G)^* \Theta_G ,$$

where Θ_G is the Maurer-Cartan form on G and π_{F_2M} (resp. π_G) is the canonical projection on F_2M (resp. G). \mathcal{A} turns out to be a connection 1-form on the principal bundle $F_2M \times_{G_2} G$ [13].

Since we are concerned with local expressions, consider the local connection 1-form $A = \sigma^* \mathcal{A}$ (gauge field on M) obtained as pull-back of the connection 1-form by a (local) section $\sigma(x)$ of $F_2M \times_{G_2} G$. When we restrict ourselves to $F_2M \simeq F_2M \times_{G_2} \{\mathbf{1}\}$, and take $\sigma(x) = (e_2(x), \mathbf{1})$, the gauge field reduces to $A = e_2^* \omega$, namely the local expression of the Cartan connection on M . As it will be shown, this is the gauge field considered by Polyakov.

As outlined in [15], let us first consider, in the natural gauge, the “local expression” on F_2M of the Cartan connection ω (a gauge like redefinition which to some extent is field dependent)

$$\Gamma(e_2, \omega) = \text{Ad}(\ell(e_2)) \omega + e_2 \cdot de_2^{-1}, \quad (5)$$

where $\ell(e_2) = (e_a^\mu, e_{ab}^\mu, e_{abc}^\mu)$ is the necessary lift of an element $e_2 \in G_2$ into G_3 . It can be shown that the local connection 1-form Γ generalizes the Christoffel symbols to second order frames [7]. Moreover by extending the proof for an affine connection [9] it can be checked that the generalized Christoffel symbols depend only on the x -coordinate. A direct computation⁶ gives for the components of the torsion free Cartan connection

$$\begin{aligned} \Gamma^\mu &= e_a^\mu \theta^a = dx^\mu, \\ \Gamma^\mu_{\nu} &= e_a^\mu \theta^a_b e_\nu^b + e_{ab}^\mu \theta^a e_\nu^b + e_a^\mu de_\nu^a = 0, \\ \Gamma^\mu_{\nu\rho} &= e_{abc}^\mu \theta^c e_\nu^b e_\rho^a + e_{ac}^\mu \theta^c e_{\nu\rho}^a + e_{ab}^\mu \theta^b_d e_\nu^d e_\rho^a + e_{ac}^\mu e_\nu^c \theta^a_b e_\rho^b \\ &\quad + e_a^\mu \theta^a_b e_{\nu\rho}^b + e_a^\mu \omega_{bc}^a e_\nu^c e_\rho^b + e_a^\mu de_{\nu\rho}^a + e_{ab}^\mu d(e_\nu^b e_\rho^a) = \Gamma_{\rho\nu}^\mu. \end{aligned} \quad (6)$$

4 Reduction to the projective case

Having in mind the implementation of a $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$ gauge symmetry, we reduce right away the structure group $G = GL_{-1} \times G_2$ to $SL(2, \mathbb{R}) = SL_{-1} \times (SL_0 \ltimes SL_1)$ with the parametrization

$$\mathbb{R} \simeq SL_{-1} \ni \begin{pmatrix} 1 & b \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}, \quad SL_0 \ltimes SL_1 \ni \begin{pmatrix} a & 0 \\ c & 1/a \end{pmatrix}, \quad c \in \mathbb{R}, a \in \mathbb{R} \setminus \{0\}.$$

Accordingly the Lie algebra $\mathfrak{sl}(2, \mathbb{R})$ inherits the graded splitting $\mathfrak{sl}_{-1} \oplus \mathfrak{sl}_0 \oplus \mathfrak{sl}_1$.

This reduction amounts to restricting ourselves to the 1-dimensional (real) projective space $M = \mathbb{R}P^1$ with local coordinate x . Let u denote the local coordinate on \mathbb{R} . The bundle P_2 of projective 2-frames (x, e_u^x, e_{uu}^x) is a principal sub-bundle of F_2M with the reduced structure group $SL_0 \ltimes SL_1 \subset G_2$ (the so-called G -structure [4]). More precisely, elements g_2 of the structure group are 2-jets at $u = 0$ of the projective maps fixing $u = 0$ given by

$$g(u) = \frac{au}{cu + 1/a} \iff \begin{pmatrix} g(u) \\ 1 \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} a & 0 \\ c & 1/a \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} u \\ 1 \end{pmatrix}.$$

⁶In the course of the computation using (1) and (4) it is easier to consider $e_2 \cdot de_2^{-1} = -de_2 \cdot e_2^{-1}$.

In particular, the identification of $SL_0 \ltimes SL_1$ as subgroup of G_2 is made through

$$\begin{pmatrix} (g_u^{u'})^{1/2} & 0 \\ -\frac{1}{2} g_{uu}^{u'} (g_u^{u'})^{-3/2} & (g_u^{u'})^{-1/2} \end{pmatrix}.$$

The Cartan connection ω on F_2M restricts to P_2 as the $\mathfrak{sl}(2, \mathbb{R})$ -valued 1-form whose local expression (see (2)) reads

$$\omega_{-1} = \theta^u = e_x^u dx, \quad \omega_0 = \theta_u^u = e_u^x e_{xx}^u dx + e_x^u de_u^x, \quad \omega_1 = \omega_{uu}^u. \quad (7)$$

In the natural gauge, a projective 2-frame field $e_2(x) = j_2(f)(0)$ with $f(u) = x + g(u)$ is viewed as an element G_2 . Moreover it is well known that projective transformations $y = f(u)$ are solutions of the third order differential equation $y''' = \frac{3}{2}(y'')^2/y'$. This induces a relation between the local coordinates of the whole projective frame $j_3(f)(0) = (e_u^x, e_{uu}^x, e_{uuu}^x) \in G_3$, where the third order jet has the unique form

$$e_{uuu}^x = \frac{3}{2} (e_{uu}^x)^2 e_x^u. \quad (8)$$

The relationship (8) gives rise to the unique lift $\ell(e_2)$ of the projective 2-frames into G_3 dictated by the projective structure itself on \mathbb{RP}^1 .

By restricting the local expression (5) to the projective case, and taking into account the expressions (1), (7) and (8) the components (6) of the Cartan connection 1-form on P_2 read :

$$\begin{aligned} \Gamma^x &= dx, \\ \Gamma_x^x &= 0, \\ \Gamma_{xx}^x &= e_x^u \omega_{uu}^u + d(e_{xx}^u e_u^x) - \frac{1}{2} (e_{xx}^u e_u^x)^2 dx, \end{aligned} \quad (9)$$

where the special combination $\chi_x := e_{xx}^u e_u^x$ occurs in a Miura like expression [16]. Under a change of local coordinates $x \mapsto x'$ on M , the frame coordinates transform as

$$e_u^x \rightarrow e_u^{x'} = \frac{dx'}{dx} e_u^x, \quad e_{uu}^x \rightarrow e_{uu}^{x'} = \frac{dx'}{dx} e_{uu}^x + \frac{d^2 x'}{dx^2} (e_u^x)^2$$

while for the inverse

$$e_{x'}^u = \frac{dx}{dx'} e_x^u, \quad e_{x'x'}^u = \left(\frac{dx}{dx'} \right)^2 e_{xx}^u - \left(\frac{dx}{dx'} \right)^3 \frac{d^2 x'}{dx^2} e_x^u.$$

It can be checked, on the one hand, that χ_x behaves as an affine connection, and, on the other hand, that the third component Γ_{xx}^x behaves as a projective connection, namely

$$\Gamma_{xx}^x - \frac{dx'}{dx} \Gamma_{x'x'}^{x'} = \left(\frac{d^3 x'}{dx^3} \Big/ \frac{dx'}{dx} - \frac{3}{2} \left(\frac{d^2 x'}{dx^2} \Big/ \frac{dx'}{dx} \right)^2 \right) dx, \quad (10)$$

where the right hand side is recognized as the Schwarzian derivative.

So, locally on P_2 the connection Γ as a $\mathfrak{sl}(2, \mathbb{R})$ -valued 1-form is parametrized as

$$\Gamma = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & dx \\ \Gamma_{xx}^x & 0 \end{pmatrix}. \quad (11)$$

Given a projective 2-frame field $e_2(x)$, let us denote the local representative of the Cartan connection on M by $e_2^* \omega = (\theta_{,x}^u + \theta_{u,x}^u + \omega_{uu,x}^u) dx$. Thus (11) is pulled-back to M as

$$\begin{pmatrix} 0 & 1 \\ \Gamma_{xx,x}^x(x) & 0 \end{pmatrix} dx, \quad \text{with } \Gamma_{xx,x}^x(x) = e_x^u \omega_{uu,x}^u + \partial_x \chi_x - \frac{1}{2} (\chi_x)^2. \quad (12)$$

Hence, the local expression of the Cartan connection ω on the projective 2-frame bundle gives rise directly to a ‘*Polyakov soldering*’ procedure but in an appropriate geometrical framework.

5 The BRS-structure

Let us now turn to the infinitesimal gauge aspect related to the $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$ Yang-Mills counterpart of the Cartan connection. The infinitesimal $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$ -gauge transformations can be recast in the more powerful and elegant BRS (graded) differential algebra [17, 18] by turning the gauge parameters to Faddeev-Popov ghost fields γ .

The infinitesimal gauge transformation is usually written in terms of a nilpotent s -operation as

$$s\omega = -d\gamma - [\omega, \gamma], \quad s\gamma = -\frac{1}{2}[\gamma, \gamma], \quad s^2 = 0, \quad (13)$$

where the graded bracket is understood with respect to the de Rham degree and the ghost number (or BRS grading). The Lie algebra content of the graded bracket is given by algebraic bracket (3). With respect to the bigrading, one has the nilpotency properties $(d + s)^2 = 0$, namely $d^2 = s^2 = ds + sd = 0$. Recall that the nilpotent algebra (13) can be compactly encapsulated into one formula only, the so-called Russian formula for the field strength (the curvature)

$$d\omega + \frac{1}{2}[\omega, \omega] = (d + s)(\omega + \gamma) + \frac{1}{2}[\omega + \gamma, \omega + \gamma], \quad (14)$$

where $\omega + \gamma$ acquires the status of algebraic connection [19].

Let us introduce now the projective parametrization [20] as the redefinition ⁷

$$\Gamma + c = \text{Ad}(\ell(e_2))(\omega + \gamma) + e_2 \cdot (d + s)e_2^{-1}, \quad (15)$$

where the ghost field is redefined by $c = \text{Ad}(\ell(e_2))\gamma + e_2 \cdot se_2^{-1}$. It can be checked that

$$s\Gamma = -dc - [\Gamma, c], \quad sc = -\frac{1}{2}[c, c].$$

Recalling that the local representative $e_2^* \omega$ of the Cartan connection is a $(\mathfrak{sl}_{-1} \oplus \mathfrak{sl}_0 \oplus \mathfrak{sl}_1)$ -valued 1-form on M , an obvious $\mathfrak{sl}(2, \mathbb{R})$ -ghost parameter can be chosen to be

$$\gamma = (e_2^* \omega)(\xi) = \omega(e_{2*} \xi)$$

⁷Limiting ourselves to 1-frames $\text{Ad}(\ell(e_1))(\omega + \gamma) + e_1 \cdot (d + s)e_1^{-1}$ where $\ell(e_1) = (e_a^\mu, 0) \in G_2$ exactly yields the conformal parametrization given in [20].

where $\xi = \xi^x \partial_x$ is the ghost vector field defined on M . More explicitly the components of that particular gauge ghost read

$$\gamma^u = \theta^u_{,x} \xi^x = e^u_x \xi^x, \quad \gamma^u_u = \theta^u_{u,x} \xi^x = (e^u_{xx} e^x_u + e^u_x \partial_x e^x_u) \xi^x, \quad \gamma^{uu} = \omega^u_{uu,x} \xi^x. \quad (16)$$

Then, performing the BRS transformations (13) on the components of the Cartan connection, with respect to that particular ghost parametrization, one gets

$$\begin{aligned} s\theta^u_{,x} &= \partial_x \gamma^u + \theta^u_{u,x} \gamma^u - \gamma^u_u \theta^u_{,x} = \partial_x (\theta^u_{,x} \xi^x), \\ s\theta^u_{u,x} &= \partial_x \gamma^u_u + \omega^u_{uu,x} \gamma^u - \gamma^u_{uu} \theta^u_{,x} = \partial_x (\theta^u_{u,x} \xi^x), \\ s\omega^u_{uu,x} &= \partial_x \gamma^u_{uu} + \omega^u_{uu,x} \gamma^u_u - \gamma^u_{uu} \theta^u_{u,x} = \partial_x (\omega^u_{uu,x} \xi^x); \end{aligned} \quad (17)$$

these variations can be compactly gathered as $s\omega = -d(\omega(\xi)) = (i_\xi d - di_\xi) =: L_\xi \omega$, which is nothing but the Lie derivative⁸ expressing the action of diffeomorphisms on the Cartan connection 1-form.

Using the local expressions (7) of θ^u and θ^u_u , the variations (17) infer the lift of the diffeomorphisms on 2-frame fields as BRS transformations given by

$$\begin{aligned} se^u_x &= s\theta^u_{,x} = \partial_x (e^u_x \xi^x) \\ se^u_{xx} &= e^u_x s\theta^u_{u,x} + e^x_u e^u_{xx} se^u_x + e^x_u \partial_x e^u_x se^u_x - (e^u_x)^2 \partial_x (se^u_u) \\ &= \partial_x e^u_{xx} \xi^x + 2e^u_{xx} \partial_x \xi^x + e^u_x \partial_x^2 \xi^x \end{aligned} \quad (18)$$

Accordingly, in each sector of the graded algebra $\mathfrak{sl}_{-1} \oplus \mathfrak{sl}_0 \oplus \mathfrak{sl}_1$ we are respectively left with the following ghosts

$$\begin{aligned} c^x &= e^x_u \gamma^u = \xi^x, \\ c^x_x &= e^x_{uu} e^u_x \gamma^u + \gamma^u_u + e^x_u se^u_x = \partial_x \xi^x \\ c^x_{xx} &= \frac{1}{2} (e^u_{xx})^2 (e^x_u)^3 \gamma^u + e^x_{uu} (e^u_x)^2 \gamma^u_u + \gamma^u_{uu} e^u_x + 2e^x_{uu} e^u_x se^u_x + e^x_u se^u_{xx} \\ &= \partial_x^2 \xi^x + \left(\partial_x \chi_x - \frac{1}{2} (\chi_x)^2 + e^u_x \omega^u_{uu,x} \right) \xi^x = \partial_x^2 \xi^x + \Gamma^x_{xx,x} \xi^x, \end{aligned} \quad (19)$$

which are exactly the ghost version of the gauge parameters found by Polyakov in [1]. With the help of (18) the BRS transformations on the connection form Γ (9) are computed to be

$$s\Gamma^x_{,x} = 0, \quad s\Gamma^x_{x,x} = 0, \quad s\Gamma^x_{xx,x} = \partial_x^3 \xi^x + \xi^x \partial_x \Gamma^x_{xx,x} + 2\partial_x \xi^x \Gamma^x_{xx,x}. \quad (20)$$

These variations derive from the geometry, while the first two were imposed in [1] as constraints in order to keep the gauge choice. The third variation can be rewritten as,

$$s\Gamma^x_{xx,x} = \partial_x^3 c^x + c^x \partial_x \Gamma^x_{xx,x} + 2\partial_x c^x \Gamma^x_{xx,x}, \quad (21)$$

where c^x is the ghost vector field with $sc^x = c^x \partial_x c^x$ and $s^2 = 0$.

As claimed in [1], this residual BRS algebra exactly reproduces the well known Virasoro algebra action on the energy-momentum tensor suitably identified with $\Gamma^x_{xx,x}$.

⁸Remind that ξ carries a ghost degree and that here M is one dimensional.

6 Conclusions

Cartan geometry provides a proper framework which amounts to explain both the ‘geometrical surprise’ expressed by Polyakov and the field dependence of the constraint on the gauge parameters. As shown, on the one hand, it turns out that the specific Polyakov partial gauge fixing is just the local expression (9) of the Cartan connection for which the first two components with respect to a graded Lie algebra are those of the solder 1-form on the second order frame bundle, while the untouched third component of the Cartan connection acquires a geometrical status, namely that of a projective connection. Recall that the latter shares exactly the same geometrical feature of the effective energy-momentum tensor in 2D-conformal chiral theory. The approach has the advantage of shedding some light on the Polyakov soldering which is the main basis of the so-called W -gravity [3, 20]. Incidentally, the framework of Cartan geometry gives a significant improvement of some manipulations performed in [20].

On the other hand, the relationship between a Cartan connection and the usual (Ehresmann) connection on a principal bundle has allowed us to gain some insight into the derivation of “*diffeomorphisms out of gauge transformations*” given by Polyakov in [1]. This has been achieved by lifting the diffeomorphisms from the base manifold to the second order frame bundle, see (18). All geometrical manipulations were carried out in terms of projective 2-frame fields.

Furthermore, the use of Cartan connections has been somewhat put aside in spite of a few attempts in the past [21] as well as the use of second order frames [22]. However there is a revival interest in the use of the concept of Cartan connections, especially in (conformal) gravity or in the study of PDE’s, see for instance [14, 23–30]. An extensive study of the Cartan connections and the related geometries has been also performed by the mathematical Czech school see *e.g.* [31] and references therein. In particular, a possible route in relation with the so-called W -symmetries as extended conformal symmetries could have been opened on the mathematical side by the study of parabolic geometries and their Cartan connections *e.g.* [32, 33].

The Polyakov soldering provides another physical situation in which Cartan connections appear naturally. They allow to lift the action of diffeomorphisms to higher order differential structures which ought to be of interest for physical models of gravitation. They offer also a proper differential geometrical framework which allows a generalization of the Polyakov soldering (6) to higher dimensions [7], for instance when third order frames can be expressed in terms of the lower ones (this is the case for projective and conformal structures [4]).

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